

The Capacity to Flourish

Introduction

Few concepts have exerted greater influence on contemporary positive psychology than flourishing. Over the past three decades, flourishing has emerged as one of the field's central organising ideas, providing a framework through which researchers, practitioners, institutions, and policymakers have sought to understand what it means for individuals and communities to live well. In contrast to earlier psychological traditions primarily concerned with pathology, dysfunction, and disorder, flourishing redirected attention toward strengths, wellbeing, meaning, engagement, purpose, and optimal human functioning. The result has been a substantial body of scholarship that has transformed both the scientific study and practical promotion of human wellbeing.

Despite important differences in emphasis, many influential accounts converge around a common concern: identifying the characteristics, experiences, capacities, and conditions associated with lives that are going well. Ryff (1989) conceptualised psychological wellbeing through dimensions such as autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth, positive relations, and self-acceptance. Diener (1984) and subsequent subjective wellbeing researchers foregrounded life satisfaction, positive affect, and the relative absence of negative affect. Keyes (2002) distinguished flourishing from languishing through the integration of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework conceptualised flourishing through positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Huppert and So (2013) identified flourishing through the presence of multiple positive psychological characteristics including vitality, resilience, competence, engagement, and positive relationships. More recently, VanderWeele (2017) proposed flourishing as a multidimensional condition encompassing happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and material stability.

Collectively, these contributions have been enormously consequential. They have provided psychology with a robust vocabulary for describing positive functioning, generated measurable constructs capable of empirical investigation, informed interventions across educational, organisational, clinical, and community settings, and established wellbeing as a legitimate object of scientific inquiry. The flourishing tradition has therefore succeeded in advancing a far richer understanding of what human thriving looks like when it becomes visible in the world.

Yet the very success of flourishing research reveals a deeper question.

Across much of the literature, flourishing functions as the phenomenon requiring explanation. Researchers investigate its antecedents, dimensions, predictors, outcomes, and interventions. Institutions seek to cultivate it. Policymakers seek to promote it. Practitioners seek to strengthen it. The underlying assumption remains largely consistent: flourishing is the primary object of inquiry.

The present paper begins from the possibility that this assumption may be incomplete.

Several observations point toward this possibility. Individuals may outwardly appear successful while progressively approaching exhaustion, burnout, or collapse. Relationships may appear stable while slowly eroding the future viability of one or more participants. Institutions may generate impressive indicators of achievement while simultaneously exhausting the very people upon whom their success depends. Communities may demonstrate remarkable resilience despite chronic material constraint, while societies may contain visible flourishing alongside profound restrictions on future opportunity, participation, and development. In each instance, flourishing and the conditions that sustain flourishing appear capable of diverging.

These observations reveal a recurring paradox. Human beings may display many of the characteristics associated with flourishing while simultaneously inhabiting conditions that progressively undermine the long-term viability of meaningful participation. Conversely, individuals and communities may experience considerable adversity while retaining surprisingly robust capacities for recovery, contribution, development, and future-oriented action. The issue is therefore not merely whether flourishing is present at a particular moment. The deeper issue concerns whether the conditions necessary for flourishing remain viable across time.

This distinction becomes especially important within contexts marked by inequality, instability, historical fracture, displacement, contested legitimacy, or chronic uncertainty. Under such conditions, flourishing cannot be understood solely as a state to be attained, measured, or maintained. Before flourishing can be cultivated, protected, sustained, or expanded, the possibility of flourishing must itself remain viable. The question therefore shifts from realised wellbeing to the conditions that render wellbeing possible.

The argument advanced in this paper is straightforward yet consequential. Flourishing describes the realised expression of human possibility. The capacity to flourish describes the viability of that possibility prior to its realisation. Flourishing refers to what becomes visible when meaningful participation, development, contribution, belonging, and future orientation are successfully sustained. The capacity to flourish refers to the relational, historical, material, institutional, cultural, and psychological conditions through which such flourishing becomes possible, recoverable, transferable, and sustainable across time.

This shift in emphasis carries significant theoretical implications. It moves analysis from outcomes to conditions, from achievement to viability, from states to trajectories, and from isolated experiences to systems of participation. It creates a conceptual bridge between positive psychology's concern with flourishing and broader questions concerning institutions, relationships, history, infrastructure, legitimacy, participation, and human development. Most importantly, it directs attention toward an object that has remained surprisingly underdeveloped within flourishing scholarship itself.

Positive psychology has generated powerful accounts of flourishing. It has been less explicit regarding the conditions through which flourishing becomes viable in the first place.

The central claim of this paper is therefore that flourishing may not be the most fundamental object requiring explanation. More foundational than flourishing itself is the capacity to flourish: the viability of meaningful human possibility across time.

The question is no longer simply:

What does flourishing look like when it is present?

The deeper question becomes:

What must remain viable for flourishing to become possible at all?